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ABSTRACT

Being gay or lesbian has been associated with many risk factors for youth, including the risk of rejection by family and peers. A limited study concerning gay youth at play and the significance of play in identity development of gay youth is reported here. The report has two purposes: to describe the social activities at a gathering specifically for gay youth and to analyze the social activities in terms of play and identity development for those attending. Data were collected employing traditional qualitative techniques. A detailed description of an overnight function held for gay youth is provided. Analysis of the different activities and the stages of play are then offered. It is concluded that making available to gay youth a variety of sanctioned social activities provides them an environment whereby they can develop, through play, their identities as homosexual individuals. In this safe environment the play of gay youth seems to follow certain patterns. It is argued that playing at being gay is essential before an individual can play with others in a gay role and thereby assume a personal identity of a competent gay person. (RJM)

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GAY YOUTH AT A SOCIAL GATHERING: PLAY AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

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GAY YOUTH AT A SOCIAL GATHERING: PLAY AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

This paper is a report of a limited study concerned with gay youth at play and the significance of play in identity development of gay youth. The term gay youth refers to young men who refer to themselves as gay and young women who identify themselves as lesbian and who are between the ages of 15 and 24 years old. The gay youth who were participants in the study reside in an urban setting in a city which has a population of about 150,000 residence. The site for the study was an urban support center for gay and lesbian youth. In the center, the study examined a youth group for gay and lesbian teens and young adults in general, but the study focused primarily on one social gathering of the youth group. The gathering was a semi-structured event which lasted about eleven hours one summer evening, night, and early morning.

It has been estimated that one in ten youth has a homosexual orientation (Unks, 1995). Such youth face many challenges unique to their place in society as a result of their sexual orientation. Among these is the process of discovering one's sexual identity in a setting that is generally hostile to any identity that is not heterosexual. Concomitant with discovering one's sexual identity is the problematic development of a personal identity of a gay person in the same hostile environment.

Being gay or lesbian has been associated with many risk factors for youth. Included among these are risk of family rejection, and risk of peer rejection and harassment. The realities of these risks may lead to homelessness and living as "street kids," and suicide. Additionally, gay and lesbian street kids are seen has having the potential to be at an increased risk for HIV/AIDS. A factor which may be associated with the level of risk is the amount and quality of social support available to young gay and lesbian adults during this critical time of their lives. Hence, the problem which this study addressed was: What

is the nature of *support* provided by a gay and lesbian youth support program?

Purposes

The paper has two purposes. The first is to describe the social activities at a gathering specifically for gay youth. And the second, is to analyze the social activities in terms of play and identity development for those attending the gay youth social gathering. The overall purpose of the paper is to present a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) concerning the activities the members of gay youth groups and their identity development. It should be noted that at the onset of the study, the concepts of play, identity development, and the relationship between the two did not guide the study. It was during the analysis of the field data that these concepts emerged, and their importance in understanding and describing at least one aspect of the nature of *support* provided to gay youth in an urban gay/lesbian youth support program was identified.

Design, Methods, and Data Sources

The design of the study was a single site limited case study. Qualitative research methods were employed for data collection and data analysis (Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The general focus of the study was the activities of youth group for gay and lesbian teens and young adults. The youth group met regularly at a center located in a urban area of the Pacific Northwest. In addition to meetings at the center, the center was open two days a week for gay youth to drop in and "hang out." As note previously, the specific focus of the study was one social activity of the group at their center sponsored by the youth group and its director. The group referred to the activity as an "overnighter" and was a sequestered all night gathering of a group of gay youths intended to be fun.

Data were collected employing traditional qualitative techniques including participant observation, semi-structured opened-ended interviews, document collection, and documental photography (Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data were collected while the center was open to youth during its

regular day-time hours and during the evening, night, and early morning when the "overnighter" was held. All participants were assured confidentiality; pseudonyms are used in this report of the study. Participants under the age of 18 were not interviewed.

The Center and the Youth Group

The youth group for gay and lesbian teens and young adults was established in 1991. Originally, it met once a week as a group for young people to talk. This was referred to as a "rap" group. It was not and is not intended to be a therapy group. No professional counselors are involved. Rather, it is staffed by adult members of the gay community. The primary staff person, D.S., has coordinated the group from its inception and has provided the motivation and vision for the group.

Currently, the youth group has expanded and now includes two groups. There are two rap groups, one for those under 18 years and another for those 18 years and over. The groups meet at different times on the same day; however there is an overlapping period when a members may attend both groups. In addition to the rap groups, the two groups hold separate meetings which meet on different nights of the week. The younger group meets on Tuesdays, the older one on Thursdays. At the weekly meetings, members talk about aspects of their lives and experiences. In addition, this is the time for events to be planned, information disseminated, and participation in speaking engagements coordinated. Once the groups were primarily young men, but now they are approximately two-thirds young women.

In addition to the weekly meetings, the center is open Friday evenings and Sunday afternoons for members to just drop in and hand out. The center functions as an informal meting place and as a second home for many. As a group, the members have participated in the local gay pride march, carrying banners and signs identifying them as a group. They have sold pride key chains, pride bracelets, and pride anklets in order to raise both funds and awareness. The group also

published its own newsletter, primarily for members. The newsletter serves as an outlet for creative expression and to provide information about gay related events happening in the community.

The youth group was established and continues to be funded by the local health department under the auspices of HIV/AIDS prevention. Indeed, much prevention education is apparent in the posters, books, and the prevailing attitudes of the group members. The atmosphere of the center is homey. The center is furnished with donated couches, chair, and pillows. It has a very warn appearance but conveys a welcoming feeling. There is a resource library, a small meeting room, a pop vending matching, couches and overstuffed chairs. Gay-targeted magazines are on the tables, and gay-friendly, support posters hand on the walls. The center is located in a fairly anonymous looking building. No sign indicates the center's presence. Access to the center, the group, and group activities it through the center coordinator, D.S.; she screens all potential participants.

The Overnighter

The overnighter began about 6:00 pm at the drop-in center. The center is located on a busy arterial in the city. It was a hot, summer evening.

People began arriving at six. A group began to assemble before the center was opened. Those who arrived early waited outside, but not in front of the center. Instead, they walked down about a quarter of a block and waited as a group on the corner in front of a restaurant. There were four girls and two boys.

The center coordinator, D., arrived shortly after six. Upon arrival, she pulled into the parking lot at the rear of the center and came around to the front to open the door. Before she got out of the parking lot, she was met by the early arrivals who accompanied her to the entrance on the street.

Once inside, greeting were exchanged and several of the kids took a moment to talk with D. The researcher was introduced to those present as a friend of D's, a person from a

university working on a research project. No one seemed to mind the researcher's presence, and the researcher appeared to be accepted by the group.

The kids made themselves at home. A couple went back to the bumper pool table to play bumper pool. One person went into D's. office to play computer games. Another pair just wandered around. The tone for the first hour or two was one of waiting for others to arrive, for the events to begin, for time to pass. There was not a sense of impatience, but one of quiet anticipation.

Kids were coming in and going out of the center for the first several hours, asking about friends who were not present, going outside to smoke, looking at magazines, going through the videotapes D. had rented for the occasion, playing pool, or simply conversing in small groups or in pairs.

By 8:00 pm the decision was made that it was time to order the pizzas. D. order the pizzas by phone, and a group of young women volunteered to pick them up. When the volunteers arrived back at the center, they carried a variety of pizzas with flavored crusts. D. was in her office speaking on the phone, so when the food arrived it was simply stacked on one of the couches. With D. not available, there was no one to give the official signal to begin eating. The pizzas sat on the couch for about five minutes before two young men decided to start eating. Once the first person dipped into the pizzas, others followed suit. At first, the kids ate the pizzas in the order in which they were stacked; finally, someone started sorting through the boxes for their preferred choice. From then on, all the pizzas were fair game.

After the pizzas were consumed, the kids began to choose some sort of activity. A group of six sat by the television VCR to watch videos. All the videos had some sort of gay theme except for one which was chosen because the women in it were particularly "hot." The first video chosen for view was *Threesome*, a movie about two male roommates and their female neighbor across the hall. One of the young men is gay, but his

roommates does not know it. The gay young man in love with his roommate, but this young man is in love with the young woman across the hall. All become close friends and eventually explore many aspects of their relationships to one another. While the video is playing, there are some kids in the back of the center's main room engaged in conversations and occasionally watching the video. Another small group of women split off and went to another room and shut the door. They took a guitar with them. Several kids restlessly wandered about and went in and out of the building. A small group was playing bumper pool. D. seemed to be the one to beat at pool, and the games with her provided an avenue for group interaction. Playing bumper pool with D. or watching her play with other kids provided a way for separate individuals and groups to interact with her as the group's leader.

Group conversations focused on popular musicians who were openly lesbian. There was considerable talk about being "in love with" or "in lust with" a particular idol. The usual banter about infatuations and teasing one another about infatuation were common. Everyone present "knew" that D. was attracted to Millissa Ethridge, a popular singer and songwriter. D. was affectionately teased for her attraction. One of the young women show the group her tattoo she had just received depicting the logo for Melissa Etheridge's last concert tour. The logo contained the words "Yes, I am," meaning being a lesbian.

About 10:00 pm, those present need to make a decision about what they were going to do for the rest of the evening. D. had told the group that the doors of the center would be locked at 10:00 pm, and that anyone who left after that time would have to stay out. "There would be no coming or going." She pushed the deadline up to 11:00, so the kids had more time to decide what they were going to do. While some kids were trying to decide what they were going to do, there was already a group who knew that they were going to leave and go dancing at the local under 21 club. This group was waiting for the two young women who had gone into another room for what appeared to be a very intense discussion. The group of kids waited fairly

patiently as if they knew what was going on and simply need to wait it out. Occasionally someone would tap on the door or rattle the doorknob to remind those inside that others were waiting. There was also a group that knew they were going to stay overnight. They were trying to convince the undecided ones to stay. The undecideds clearly were leaning toward leaving but were a little torn. One young man had already brought out his pillow, snacks, breakfast cereal, and milk. When he discovered that many of the group were leaving, mostly males, he elected to leave also. Eventually, the door to the other room opened, and those who were going to leave began the process of taking leave. Some said a general good-bye to all. Some said only individual good-byes to certain of their friends. It was a fairly long process with many interruptions and variation on the taking leave theme. Finally, those who were leaving left. And, those who remained settle down for the evening.

The one remaining male settled down to watch another video. The rest of the group again played bumper pool and conversed. Pressure began to be placed on the video watcher to end his watching, so the radio could be turned up and the rest could dance. The dancing was very short lived, but those involved clearly enjoyed themselves. Finally, the group settled down on the floor to play a board game patterned after Trivial Pursuit with elements of Pictionary and Charades thrown in. The game carried the title *The Rainbow Gayme*, and all the activities in the game centered around the experience of being gay or lesbian. The group played the game about three hours with each member in turn drawing a card, following the prescribed rules of the game and keeping score. The game provided a medium for talking about, laughing about, and exploring the experience of being gay. It was a vehicle for lot of group interaction, and all had great fun playing it.

At about 2:00 am, the members of the group spontaneously transformed the game into one of their own making. Instead of following the rules of the game and keeping score, the members in turn pulled cards from the deck and responded to the items on

the cards by sharing their personal reactions, experience, and perceptions of being gay. A sense of intimacy prevailed. After about an hour and a half of pulling cards and responding in a personal ways to each card, the group again spontaneously changed the activity. A sense of seriousness now took hold as several members told and shared their "coming out" experiences conveyed as very personal stories. Members of the group attended to each others stories with silence and empathy.

With the last story told, the overnighter was definitely winding down. Everyone was tired but reluctant for the night to be over. Conversation continued quietly about when it could be determined that all had indeed "spent the night." When dawn broke about four thirty in the morning, it was decided that all present had officially spent the night. The group which had spent the night began to start naturally breaking up at about 5:00 am. People started packing their personal things and cleaning up the center. By 5:30 am everyone had left.

Analytic Framework

Consistent with qualitative data analysis, the analytic concepts which were used to analyze and interpret the data emerged during the course of data analysis (Strauss, 1987). It must again be emphasized that the analytic concepts did not guide data collection but were generated during data analysis. A constant comparative approach was employed in data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In the analysis of data, the concepts of *play*, *playing at*, *playing with* (playing a role), and *self* as articulated by George Herbert Mead (1934), and the concepts of *self-meaning* and *personal identity as* described by Norman K. Denzin (1992) were used to analyze and interpret the data.

Mead (1934) argues that there are two stages in the full development of self. The first stage has to do with the individual's organization of the attitudes of others to him/her-self and to one another within the contexts he/she is a participant. The second stage incorporates the group or broader social attitudes of others into the self. Mead refers to the latter as

taking on the role of the generalized other. Mead characterizes the first stage as *playing at* and the second stage as *playing with.* An example of the first stage is a child *playing at* being a mother, father, or a teacher. An example of the second stage are children playing an organized game; street softball is an example. In the development of self, Mead argues that children must first *play at* before they can *play with.* Being able to *play with* in multiple situations is an indication of the fully developed self. Denzin connects Mead's concept of *self* with the concept of *personal identity.* Denzin further proposes that personal identities only emerge in social interaction processes.

The Analysis

The social event for the gay and lesbian youth was designed, intentionally or not, to serve at least important purposes, one explicit and the other implicit. From the point of view of the coordinator of the event, it was explicitly designed to serve as a opportunity for youth to get together in a setting that was safe and supportive of them as individuals. The youth involved in the overnighter were considered first as young adults and secondly as gay individuals. With that purpose in mind, the event was structured to maximize the participant's interactions with one another according to their interests. Those present determined the activities in which they engaged, the intensity of the activities, and the length of time of the activities.

Much of the time was spent in play or in playful interactions with one another. There was much teasing and joking. Kids played bumper pool and put condoms on their heads. There was dancing and conversation; and there was group video watching and playing of a board game. Some discussed famous personalities to whom they were attracted, while others flirted with some of the others present. There was a great deal of comfort with non-sexual physical contact. There was a lot of energy in the room which clearly was playful.

At an implicit level, the purpose of the event was to provide a safe environment for the youth to engage in identity development through spontaneous and uninhibited play (Mead,

1934). For analytic purposes, the play activities can be viewed as four relatively distinct yet overlapping phases of play activities which followed one another as the event progressed and as those present became more familiar and trusting of each other.

The first phase of play activities involved individuals *playing with* each other in traditional games and similar activities in small groups. An example here is bumper pool. In this and similar games, the players must not only know their own roles but also the roles of their opponents. The player must know not only how he or she should play the game, but must also know how their opponent is acting in order to anticipate what their opponent will do and then respond appropriately. In this way a stable reciprocal interpersonal activity takes place. The young adults at the overnighter came to the event with a full repertoire of knowledge and experience of *playing with* others in a variety of traditional games and activities.

In the second phase of play activities, within the context of the traditional games, the individuals in the small groups began to *play at being gay.* According to Mead (1932) and Denzin (1992) *playing at* is the is the first essential stage of identity development. Various gay persona were assumed and displayed by group members while other group members comment on the various persona. For example, during a traditional game, one young woman spoke passionately of her desire to be a firefighter and to eventually live in a reclaimed fire station. In the next breath, however, she spoke equally passionately of her love for a contemporary, openly lesbian singer and songwriter, k.d. land. In this example, the young woman was openly and spontaneously *playing at being gay* by temporarily taking on various persona and playing out the role in the presence of others.

Early in the evening while small groups were playing traditional games and using the interactions during the games to play at being gay, the event was briefly enlivened by the arrival of a group of teens from Canada led into the center by one of the

youth group members. This young man was quite flamboyant in his expression, gesture, and speech. He was clearly a favorite of those present and absolutely lit up and energized the room by making his obvious entrance. He wore a t-shirt which read, "When life's a drag, wear a dress." This is another example of one of the gay youths present *playing at being gay* in the presence of others. He was assuming a persona which he would be unable to assume in most contexts available to homosexual youth in a hostile heterosexual society.

As the evening progressed, and the dancing music turned down, the small groups engaged in traditional games and activities merged into one large group. This was the beginning of the third phase of play activity. This involved playing a large group board game. As noted above, the game was titled, *The Rainbow Gayme*, and its purpose was to explore gay and lesbian themes, ideas, and issues. Although the game had what might be regarded as a non-traditional theme, the rules of the game were quite conventional, this is to say very similar to other traditional group board games. The game involved each member of the group in turn drawing a card and responding to what the card directed. Members of the group who responded correctly to what the player was depicting could move their board markers ahead. Hence, even though the members of the large group playing the game may have never played the game previously, they were familiar enough with similar games that they could with little experience and effort play the game with each other.

The parts of the game that dealt with and asked for factual information about gay and lesbian history were the least popular. More popular were the aspects of the game that required creativity and more intense levels of interaction. Aspects of the game which involved charades were popular, as were the parts where players drew cards and had to draw what the cards directed them to draw, and the members of the group had to identify the depicted word or phrase. This lead to considerable laughter, sometimes because of the drawings, and sometimes because of the responses. The most popular part of

the game occurred when players drew cards that required them to respond to their perceptions of others. For example, one of the cards directed the player to state which one of the entire group was most likely to sleep with someone on the first date. The player who drew the card would have to decide what his or here answer was. Then, before the answer was shared with the group, each group member wrote on a piece of paper who he or she believed the player would name. When the player revealed his or her answer, those in the group who had guessed correctly got to move their board markers ahead. Within the context of a traditional large group board game, the players were able to play at being gay by creating clever and creative gay responses to the directions on the card. Other participants could play at being gay also by creating cleaver and creative responds to the player actions.

Hence, as the evening progressed, the small groups merged into a larger group, and the individuals in the larger group *played with* each other in a traditional game. Similar to the play in the small groups, the individuals in the larger group *played at being gay* in the context of the traditional game. As in the smaller groups, members of the larger group assumed various gay persona while other members of the group comment on the persona.

After the game had been played for the third time, the group decided by consensus that everyone was tired of playing the game. This began and fourth phase of play activities. Although the members were tired of playing the traditional game, they were not tired of close intimate and spontaneous interaction. The interaction among group members was continued by improvising on the traditional game. No one cared about winning or losing; no one cared about keeping score. Each member in turn continued drawing a card and responding to the item on the card. The responses were, however, different than those called for in the traditional board game. The responses were personal testimonies of their beliefs and experiences of being gay. Several of the participant presented in

detail their coming out stories. In this phase of play activities, the participants began to move from *playing at being gay* to *playing with* others in being gay. In these personal testimonies, the participants where not only able to assume their own roles as a gay person, but were also able to report and assume the roles of others, including family and friends, in their lives in response to their being gay.

Following intense *playing at being gay* in the second two phases of play activities, several group members demonstrated that they were moving to the next level of personal gay identity development. According to Mead (1932) and Denzin (1992) learning to *play with* is absolutely essential for personal identity development. And, for gay youth to learn to play with others in a gay role is absolutely essential for development of a gay identity.

Although the overnighter was explicitly designed for the purpose of providing a safe and supportive environment for gay youth, this analysis indicates that it had an additional implicit purpose. That purpose was to provide a supportive and safe environment in which gay youth could learn *to play at being gay* as first stage in developing a gay identity. For a few others it was a place to learn *to play with others* in a gay role in their final step toward developing a gay identity.

Conclusions

The conclusions of the study take the form of a grounded theory which can be summarized as follows. There are a variety of sanctioned social activities available to non-gay youth which provides them an environment whereby they can develop their identities as heterosexual individuals. However, there are almost no sanctioned social activities available to gay youth which provides them an environment whereby they can develop through play their identities as homosexual individuals (Unks, 1995). There are a few exceptions (Uribe, 1995; Blumenfeld, 1995); the gay youth group is one of the very few (Singerline, 1995). In general, the gay youth group provides a safe environment whereby gay youth can develop identities as

homosexual individuals. More specifically, a safe and sequestered social activity of a gay youth group provides an environment particularly conducive for gay youth to develop personal homosexual identities. Safe sequestered social activity provide an environment for gay youth to *play at* being gay.

Given a safe sequestered environment, the play of gay youth begins in small groups. First, the individuals in the groups *play with* each other in traditional games or similar activities. Then, second, within the context of the traditional game, the individuals in the small groups *play at being gay*. Various gay persona are assumed and displayed by group members while other group members comment on the various persona. The small groups will then merge into a larger group, and the individuals in the larger group will *play with* each other in a traditional game. Similar to the play in the small groups, the individuals in the larger group will *play at being gay* in the context of the traditional game. As in the smaller groups, members of the larger group assume various gay persona while other members of the group comment on the various persona. The larger group will then discontinue playing the traditional game and will *play at being gay* exclusively. Following intense *playing at being gay*, several group members will demonstrate that they are moving to the next level of personal gay identity development. These demonstrations are manifest in personal coming out stories. These stories indicate that these individuals are learning to play *with others* as a competent gay person and are developing a personal gay identity. The stories also provide a means whereby others present can learn to *play with* others as a gay person.

One aspect of *support* of a program for gay and lesbian youth is providing a safe sequestered environment in which social activities can occur which encourages gay youth *to play with* one another in tradition games and activities. More importantly however, this environment allows and encourages gay youth *to play at being gay*. The environment also provides a place where individuals can demonstrate that they are learning

to *play with* others as a gay person. *Playing at being gay* is essential before an individual can *play with others* in a gay role and thereby assume a *personal identity* of a competent gay person.

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